Increasing Efficiency with Web-Based Communication Tools

By Michael Sheppard and Tom Strasburger

Online communication systems go a long way toward increasing district efficiency.

Increasing workloads and decreasing budgets have left school district staff struggling to handle all their responsibilities, and regular communication across the district and into the community often suffers. Information may be delayed, inconsistent, or simply ranked low on the priority lists of busy administrators. Even transmitting information via email, which is traditionally considered a speedy process, can prove cumbersome.

Using online systems to simplify or even automate tasks, such as sharing district alerts and notifications and submitting reports, significantly enhances the efficiency and accuracy of these communications.

Five years ago, Berea City School District in Ohio faced an array of challenges in effectively conveying information to and among various groups. The district sent physical materials, such as reports and professional development information, from one building to another without the ability to verify whether the materials had been seen, much less understood, by all the staff members for whom they were intended. As a result, Berea administrators had trouble maintaining compliance with legislation regarding staff training, data requirements, and reports.

Berea established committees—from school-based professional learning communities to a district-level safety committee that included the fire and police chiefs from all three suburban cities the district serves—to try to sustain the necessary flow of information but realized that face-to-face meetings were not enough.

So, when the district's human resources department was approached about implementing a Web-based safety management system, administrators saw it as a way to reduce the time and effort required to regularly apprise various groups about the information they needed to know and to track to completion events like staff training and accidents.

Streamlining Internal Processes

Berea initially limited its use of the safety management service to the automatic online delivery of specific compliance training to different employee groups. The district set deadlines for taking different courses and defined schedules for sending automatic reminders; then, the system took over the management of each expectation. The system recorded employees' completion of each course and notified supervisors if anyone did not finish training by the designated date.

After successfully implementing the online training courses, Berea expanded its system use to include reporting systems for employee and student accidents. Staff members enter incident data and the system automatically sends reports to designated recipients, including the following:

- Health care partners, such as the managed care organization and third-party administrator if there is a claim
- Incident investigators so they can immediately examine the incident
- Site and central office administrators to keep them in the loop.

Witness statements are included in the accident record so investigators can follow up. District departments can use the system to submit requests for additional information if necessary. In addition, because the safety management system integrates the training system, there is the option of assigning post-incident retraining of personnel.

The district also implemented a student bullying and safety reporting system that enables students, staff, parents, neighbors, and other concerned parties to submit reports—anonymously if they wish—about bullying, harassment, and other safety issues.

The reports are sent automatically to the superintendent, assistant superintendent, and principal of the relevant school who then use the information to investigate and document the results in the system.

In Ohio, state legislation requires school districts to post the number of bullying incidents online; the automated system's tracking capabilities enable administrators to supply that information quickly and accurately.

In 2009, Berea also enhanced internal communications by subscribing to a Web-based platform that has moved the district's forms and professional development proposals online in order to automate workflow processes.

Completed electronic forms or proposals are forwarded to appropriate recipients via the platform, and the sender can track the status throughout the process.

Additionally, educators within the district are using a free, open-source learning management system to create wikis and blogs that supplement their efforts in establishing professional learning communities. For example, district science teachers have formed an online learning group and upload lessons, activities, links, photos, and video clips to the learning management system in order to share ideas and receive feedback and suggestions.

Enhancing External Communication

At the same time Berea implemented the safety system, the district also acquired a Web-based notification service that enables educators at the school or district level to contact a group of parents simultaneously with one call rather than relying on phone trees. The service can be adjusted to target specific sets of parents or caregivers; for example, the system can be programmed to call only parents of first graders throughout the district or parents of first graders who attend a particular school.

District administrators use the service to inform households of districtwide emergencies or school closings due to inclement weather. At the school level, educators announce initiatives, send reminders about parent-teacher conferences, and inform parents about incidents at school that might concern them—preferably before the rumors begin.

Streamlining communication channels can have significant monetary benefits.

Parent-teacher communication was also enhanced by a new system the district purchased in 2010. Parents receive an access code to the system so they can go online to find out about specific classes their child is taking. For example, they can see homework assignments and whether a particular assignment is overdue and by how many days. They can also see their child's grades and how those grades are weighted.

Points to Consider

In the face of tightening budgets, school districts may question spending money on these Web-based systems, but streamlining communication channels can have significant monetary benefits. In the case of worker accidents, the International Association of Industrial Accidents Boards and Commissions found that reporting delays of a week or more generally results in higher medical costs, longer periods of disability, and a higher likelihood of litigation and causation disputes.

Another major advantage of using Web-based services is that districts do not need to provide storage or the manpower to ensure that data are secure. Also, the use of electronic documents saves paper costs.

However, school districts should consider certain points if they decide to implement Web-based communication systems:

- Systems that offer online training courses should have the capacity to create customized courses that address state-specific mandates and immediately reflect best practice or legislative changes in order to keep the district compliant.

- Safety hotline vendors should serve as additional backup by reviewing hotline reports as they come in and activating a call tree in the event of an emergency. In one district that used the safety management system, the service vendor alerted district personnel about a message from a potentially suicidal student. After the local police were notified, the vendor was able to provide additional information to help the authorities locate the student.

- Plans for external communications should include options for households without computers. Only 50% of the families that Berea serves have computers, so the hotline provides both online and toll-free telephone reports.

Communication enhances the interaction and interdependence of a district and its internal and external groups. Turning over many of its existing communications efforts to online systems provided Berea and its educators with more time and better access to the information needed to create the best possible learning environment for students.

Michael Sheppard is assistant superintendent of Berea City School District in Ohio. Email: msheppard@berea.k12.oh.us

Tom Strasburger is vice president of PublicSchoolWORKS, WORKS International Inc., Cincinnati, Ohio. Email: tstrasburger@publicschoolworks.com